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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest discusses public schooling for 4-year-old children and other preschoolers. Sections concern: (1) conditions presently creating a need for child care and early education; (2) the population to be served; (3) program types, including the traditional preschool, the academic preschool, and a hybrid form; (4) program sites; and (5) child care in public schools. While the clamor to place 4-year-olds in public schools continues, it should be remembered that 4-year-olds are but one subgroup of the preschool population and schools provide only one alternative for their care and education. Questions about the public support of child care for all preschool children will continue to be raised. (RH)

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Four-Year-Olds and Public Schooling

Sally Lubeck

Unprecedented demographic and economic shifts have raised questions about how best to care for America's children. Estimates are that by 1995, the mothers of 2/3 of preschoolers and 3/4 of school-aged children will work outside the home (Hofferth & Phillips, 1987). With the baby boom generation at child bearing age, there has been a marked increase in the absolute number of children. Change on this scale has generated discussion of a national, publicly supported child care system.

This digest addresses public schooling for 4-year olds and preschoolers, structural and demographic trends, research results, age and child and family characteristics, subgroups that might be served, types of programs, and location of programs.

Why Child Care and Early Education Now?

Economic trends have increased the likelihood that families will require two incomes to maintain family comfort. A third of the new full-time jobs created since 1978 have paid an annual wage below the poverty line for a family of four (Bluestone & Harrison, 1986). According to a recent report, 59% of women with children 5-13 were in the labor force (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987). The number of female-headed households is increasing. A majority of children in households dependent on women live in poverty. Child support payments are frequently inadequate or nonexistent, and welfare and social security payments remain insufficient.

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A body of literature supports programs for young children from low-income families on the grounds that such programs have long-term benefits for many participants. The Perry Preschool Program in Ypsilanti, Michigan made the case that children who attended the project's preschool program were less likely than others to experience difficulties in life. They were more likely to finish high school, attend college, and hold jobs (Berrueta-Clement, and others, 1984). Such evidence has consistently been cited to support policy initiatives for the development or expansion of preschool programs.

Who Should Be Served?

A public program for preschoolers can serve all preschoolers or selected subgroups. The former strategy has rarely been followed in recent legislation. The tendency is to focus on a target group of children with special needs and provide resources only to that group. This tendency has arisen because a case can be made that a particular subgroup of children is especially deserving of help and that provision to a target group keeps costs from rising to politically frightening heights.

Preschool subgroups with special needs have been defined in terms of age, child, or family characteristics. Although attention now centers on 4-year-olds, younger children also need care. Currently, children qualify for preschool programs if they are handicapped or, in some states, if they score low on screening tests, speak a language other than English, or come from low-income families.

Over the last 25 years, much legislation has been designed to benefit subgroups with special needs. The philosophy of *vertical equity*—the unequal treatment of unequals in order to make them more equal—has been supported by the American public (Gallagher, 1984). But policy is not made on this basis alone. If public programs are only for the poor, they will foster racial and income segregation. If public programs are only for the handicapped, these children will be isolated from their nonhandicapped peers. Clearly, many criteria need to be considered when one addresses the question "Who should be served?"

What Type of Program?

Should programs be part of general social services to families, and thus housed in departments of human resources or social services? Or should they be educational programs for the young and, therefore, governed by departments of education? Is the principle objective of a program the provision of care while parents work, or the creation of opportunities for children to develop socially and emotionally or to be prepared for formal schooling?

Research on programs and curriculum models identify three generic types: the traditional preschool, the academic preschool, and a hybrid form.

The traditional preschool. The traditional preschool was historically a part-day program for middle-class children.

Today, the program is characterized by a teacher who is indirect, an environment that is carefully planned (but allows children to learn through active exploration and discovery), an emphasis on learning at one's own pace, and an appreciation for developmentally appropriate activities.

The academic preschool. Academic programs for preschoolers frequently involve efforts to help low-income children catch up to their middle-class peers. The academic preschool shares many characteristics of public schooling for older children: teacher-directed instruction, clear goals and expectations, tight scheduling, and the teaching of skills for school success. A major concern among child developmentalists is that school-based early education programs will, like many kindergartens, become junior first grades.

The hybrid form. Efforts have been made to blend aspects of each of these forms, primarily by including both structured and unstructured activities.

Where Should Programs Be Offered?

Should a child be nurtured in a family setting or an educational setting? Most working parents use one or more of these choices: home care by a family member, care in another's home, care in or through the worksite, center-based and school-based care.

Child Care in Public Schools

The downward extension of schooling to younger children is evident. More 5-year-olds are attending kindergarten more hours each day than ever before, and public school-based programs for threes and fours seem to be increasing. State initiatives and contributions to Head Start-funded, school-based programs served about 139,000 children of 3-5 in 1987-88 (Marx & Seligson, 1988).

Those who favor expansion of public school-based programs argue that schools are universally available, safe, and convenient. A preschooler could attend school with friends and siblings in the neighborhood. Programs would be guaranteed a steady source of funding. Standards could be set; programs monitored; staff salaries increased; and benefits guaranteed. Those who question the efficacy of a school-based solution note that schools have never been equal. Moreover, a school-based child care system would be centralized, bureaucratized, and expensive. Some say it would result in a regimented program.

Zigler (1987) has presented a plan for a national, school-based system in which school buildings house both the educational and child care system. Child care would include before- and after-school care; vacation programs for school-aged children; half-day care for kindergartners; and developmental care for children of 3-5. Costs would be contained by a two-tier system of staffing in which credentialed teachers taught part of the day and those with less formal training and lower salaries taught the rest. The expense of such a system is not known, but Zigler estimates it at $75-100 billion a year. Primary support would come from increases in local property taxes.

Conclusion

The clamor to place 4-year-olds in public schools goes on. But four-year-olds are only one subgroup of the preschool population, and schools provide only one alternative for their care and education. Questions about the public support of early child care will continue to be raised.

This digest was adapted from an article titled, "Four-Year-Olds and Public Schooling? Framing the Question," which appeared in the periodical *Theory Into Practice* (Vol. XXVIII, No.1): 3-10.

For more information:

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